

Summary of essay by Laura O'Donohue for the University of Cambridge Institute for Sustainability Leadership published in the Yale Sustainable Food Program Newsletter

Consumers in the United States encounter on a daily basis baffling array of food date labels: best-by, sell-by, use-by, and more. Typically, they assume that past-date food is no longer safe to eat. However, this is often not the case. Much of what consumers and retailers dispose of is edible, healthful, and flavorful. In this sense, a significant quantity of food that is currently disposed of could be safely consumed. Annually, households waste on average 20% of food purchased, at an estimated cost of \$1,800 per household, or \$218 billion country-wide (ReFED, 2016; Foodprint, 2021). This represents a squandering of resources: 25% of the nation's fresh water and 300 million barrels of oil are used each year to produce food that is ultimately thrown out or spoiled (Hall *et al.*, 2009).

This kind of food waste is a main contributor of methane gas emissions. According to the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), food is the largest source of material in municipal landfills, accounting for 14.1% of methane emissions in 2017 and 15% of methane emissions in 2019 (Buzby and USDA, 2021; United States Environmental Protection Agency, 2021).

If the United States hopes to reduce landfill emissions due to food waste, it must educate consumers on best practices for consumption and the meaning of printed labels, while bolstering the efforts of food pantries to collect and funnel unused items, that might otherwise be discarded, to food-insecure individuals.

Since the start of the Covid-19 pandemic, nearly 23% of American families have experienced food insecurity (Schanzenbach and Pitts, 2020). As a result, food recipient organizations have experienced heightened demand for donations (Kulish, 2020). To address this crisis, food-saving organizations must embrace three updated strategies: widening the scope of food accepted for donation, including near-date and past-date products, and increasing the quantity of foods distributed; including foods formerly disposed of and educating staff and patrons on the safe consumption of past-date foods.

In order to achieve these goals, food-recipient organizations, retailers, and consumers will need reliable guidelines to determine the safety of past-date foods. As a solution, this paper proposes the dissemination of the easy-to-understand infographic below with recommendations for past-date food consumption. The infographic breaks down products by food group—produce, dairy, meat, etc.—and indicates the additional time, past the printed date, by which each food is safe to eat. These guidelines may help both consumers and organizations make informed decisions about what to eat and to donate, extending the life of foods rather than prematurely disposing of them.

This paper proposes, as a solution, to highlight immediate steps that can be taken to address the twin issues of food waste and food insecurity. Beyond the adoption of the infographic, a nation-wide educational campaign is necessary to redirect past-date foods to meet the needs of hungry Americans and contribute to the reduction of methane gas emissions.